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Author(s): Alicia Menéndez Tarrazo

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BRIDGE INDIANS AND CULTURAL BASTARDS: NARRATIVES OF URBAN EXCLUSION IN THE WORLD'S 'MOST LIVEABLE' CITY

Alicia Menéndez Tarrazo
Universidad de Oviedo
alicia.menendez.tarrazo@gmail.com

This article examines the representation of the city of Vancouver in two contemporary short stories: Lee Maracle's 'Polka Partners, Uptown Indians and White Folks' and Shani Mootoo's 'Out on Main Street' first published in 1999 and 1993, respectively. Both stories explore the impossibility of establishing a fixed, stable identity and a solid sense of belonging in the diasporic space of the multicultural city. At the same time, the embracement and celebration of a diasporic identity is not an alternative for those who inhabit the margins of the urban socioscape. Maracle's *Bridge Indians* (First Nations or Native Canadians, i.e. Canada's Aborigines) and Mootoo's *cultural bastards* (Indo-Trinidadians) are barred from full participation in the life of the city on the grounds of their ethnic origin, gender and sexuality. In contrast with the dominant narrative that constructs Vancouver as *the most liveable city in the world*, these stories stand as micro-narratives of an alternative urban experience defined by alienation, exclusion and marginalisation.

Keywords: urban representation; ethnicity; sexuality; liveability; Vancouver; Lee Maracle; Shani Mootoo

NARRATIVAS DE LA HABITABILIDAD Y LA EXCLUSIÓN URBANA EN VANCOUVER

El presente artículo se propone analizar la representación de la ciudad de Vancouver en dos relatos breves: 'Polka Partners, Uptown Indians and White Folks' (Lee Maracle, 1999) y 'Out on Main Street' (Shani Mootoo, 1993). Ambos relatos tratan sobre la imposibilidad de establecer una identidad unívoca y permanente en el contexto de la ciudad diaspórica y multicultural. Al mismo tiempo, la celebración de las identidades diaspóricas se plantea como un objetivo inalcanzable para quienes habitan los márgenes del espacio social urbano. Las mujeres que protagonizan estas historias (aborígenes canadienses e indo-trinitenses, respectivamente) son excluidas de participar plenamente en la vida de la ciudad por motivo de su origen étnico, género y sexualidad. Frente a la narrativa dominante que construye Vancouver como la ciudad más habitable del mundo, estos relatos se presentan como micronarrativas de una experiencia urbana marcada por la alienación y la marginación.

Palabras clave: representación urbana; etnicidad; sexualidad; habitabilidad; Vancouver; Lee Maracle; Shani Mootoo

1. Introduction Reading the city: two Vancouver narratives

In January 2008, *The Economist* declared Vancouver the world's most liveable city for the sixth time in a row.¹ The Global Liveability Ranking, developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit, is the result of a worldwide survey of 140 cities which rates them in terms of stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education and infrastructure. Vancouver scored the highest liveability index thanks to its low population density, a highly developed transport and communications network, a wide array of recreational possibilities, and little or no threat of violence or instability ('Urban Idylls'). A few months later, Mercer Human Resources Consulting released its 'Worldwide Quality of Living Survey', created as a resource to help governments and multinational companies calculate fair expatriate allowances for the employees they place on international assignments. Vancouver was ranked number four among 215 world cities, surpassed in quality of life only by Zurich, Vienna and Geneva ('Mercer's 2008'). London-based *Monocle* magazine dedicated its July/August 2008 issue to its own 'Global Quality of Life Survey', in which Vancouver came in eighth among the world's 25 most liveable cities and was praised for its environmental consciousness, cultural diversity and tolerance. Unlike the Economist Intelligence Unit and Mercer, *Monocle* does not assess the hypothetical effect of cities in the quality of life of expatriate, globally mobile elite workers; instead, it focuses on the everyday lives of their residents, and looks at aspects of urban life ranging "from communication links to crime, hours of sunshine to liquor licensing hours", in an attempt to discover "the best city to call home" ('Quality of Life Trailer').

After six years at the top of these rankings, the idea of *optimum liveability* has begun to permeate dominant representations of the city, to the point where, nowadays, Vancouver is consistently marketed as the world's most liveable city, especially for prospective visitors, investors and employees. The official website of Tourism British Columbia, for instance, mentions Vancouver's certified liveability as one of the city's main selling points, as does the 'Invest in Canada' programme, created by the Canadian Government in an effort to attract and secure foreign capital ('Vancouver'; 'Vancouver: Canada's Pacific Gateway'). Similarly, the Municipal Government of the City of Vancouver prides itself on its employees' contribution to enhanced liveability, and publicises its job opportunities with boosterish slogans like "together, we help make Vancouver one of the world's most liveable cities (we've got the awards to prove it)" ('Employment: Vancouver!') and "Vancouver is one of the world's most liveable cities. Our success as a city is driven by the strengths of our people" ('City of Vancouver Employment Opportunities').

¹ An early draft of this paper was presented at the Triennial Conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS) 'Try Freedom: Rewriting Rights in/through Postcolonial Cultures', held in Venice in March 2008. Research towards this paper was supported by the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación under grants FPU AP2005-3522 and HUM2006-13601-Co2-01/FILO. MEGAPOLIS. Plan Nacional I+D+i 2004-2007.

At the same time, parallel to the dominant discourse of liveability, some voices have already begun to raise an inevitable question: most liveable for whom? In 2007, after Vancouver made it to the top of *The Economist's* ranking for the fifth consecutive year, Catherine Clement, vice-president of the Vancouver Foundation, wondered: "Who is it liveable for? For all or just a group of people? Vancouver is a remarkable city and a beautiful city and a great place to live but there are challenges we're facing" (Sinovski 2007). David Eby, from non-profit legal advocacy organisation PIVOT Legal Society, was more specific: "Vancouver is turning into a city only for the rich, and that's not liveable" (Smith 2007). Libby Davies, MP for Vancouver East, expressed similar concerns: "The question I have is liveable for whom? For some people it is a fantastic place but we've seen an increasing gap between poverty and wealth in Vancouver in particular. Vancouver needs to be a socially just city, that can be the best place in the world for all people" (Smith 2007).

Politicians and social activists are not the only ones to call the idea of liveability into question: poets and fiction writers usually portray Vancouver as a city that is far from being the best in the world. Literary representations of Vancouver often explore different aspects and degrees of social injustice, foregrounding issues like economic inequality, crime and urban insecurity, drug addiction and homelessness, gender discrimination, homophobia, racism, gentrification, spatial stigmatization, and urban decay, among others. Even though these problems are a routine part of the urban experience for most urban dwellers, they are systematically excluded from the official discourses about the city. In this sense, literature constitutes a source of alternative representations that counteract the dominant discourse: literary representations become a point of entry into the hidden narratives of the city, and their analysis becomes a first step towards understanding the discursive construction of Vancouver in all its complexity. In this paper I propose to analyse two short stories which can be read as alternative narratives of the city of Vancouver: Lee Maracle's 'Polka Partners, Uptown Indians and White Folks'² (2005) deals with the experience of urban First Nations,³ while Shani Mootoo's 'Out on Main Street' (2005) relates the experience of Indo-Trinidadian immigrants. Even though these stories actually predate the debate about un/liveability in Vancouver, the situations they portray and the issues they engage with are extremely current and very relevant to this discussion. Ultimately, both stories are concerned with the issue of urban exclusion, revealing the underside of the discourse of liveability and raising questions about the production and circulation of dominant urban narratives and imaginaries.

In recent years, many urban theorists have turned their attention to literary and other artistic representations of the city. One of the main reasons behind this interest is the *cultural turn* in the social sciences, which took place in the last two decades of the

² The edition of the stories used in this study is that of Douglas Coupland (2005).

³ Even though the narrator in Maracle's story describes herself and her community as *Indians*, I use more general terms such as *Natives*, *First Nations* and *Aboriginals* in order to avoid confusion when analysing Mootoo's story, in which *Indians* are people who immigrated from India. For a discussion of the uses, the nuances and the political connotations of each of these terms, see Gadacz (2009).

twentieth century and brought about an emphasis on representations and shared meanings, on the symbolic and the imaginary. For urban geographers, the cultural turn meant a realization that “[urban] space is constructed both in the realms of discourse and practice, and . . . it is only through representation – words, images and data – that space exists” (Hubbard 2006: 59). After the cultural turn, representation is understood as a discursive practice which constructs the reality of the city and determines our perception of the urban space; it is also inescapable, in the sense that reality cannot be accessed outside representation. This shift in perspective generated an interest in the different ways in which the city is imagined and represented, and a proliferation of studies based on the analysis of cultural products, such as films, photographs, comic books, paintings, sculptures and, of course, literary works. Artists, especially poets and fiction writers, are regarded as privileged witnesses to the life of the city, and deemed to have the ability to capture all its intricacies and describe them in the best, most creative ways (Blanchard 1985: 4-5; Hubbard 2006: 68; Mongin 2006: 35). As James Donald puts it, “The point of examining the imaginary cities constituted by novels and films is that it is often artists rather than urbanists who have found the language and images to teach us . . . the joyous potential of cities” (1999: 145).

The cross-disciplinary dialogue between urban and literary studies has resulted in innovative ways of reading urban literature, and also in new, interesting ways of reading the city. Urban analysts have understood that literature can be a very valuable resource for the study of the city, and some of them have even put literary works on a level with maps and statistical data because of their descriptive power and documentary value (Delgado 2007: 117; Donald 1999: 127; Duncan and Ley 1993: 33). Simultaneously, some of the concepts and methodologies that originated in the field of urban theory have been brought to bear in literary analyses, giving rise to new perspectives in the study of urban literature. Initially, this type of analyses tended to focus predominantly on modernist novels and their representation of the modern city, utilizing conceptual tools developed by the first urbanists at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, such as Karl Marx’s idea of *alienation*, Walter Benjamin’s definition of the *flâneur*, the notion of *anomie* as defined by Emile Durkheim, and the negative effects of the urban context that concerned Ferdinand Toennies.⁴ Some of these themes have also been reworked from a contemporary perspective: feminist scholars, for example, have explored the possibilities of theorising about the figure of the *flâneuse* as a way of visibilising the presence of women in the public space of the city (Parsons 2005: 159-60; Wirth-Nesher 1996: 25). Recent approaches, however, demonstrate that it is also possible to apply more contemporary theoretical frameworks to the analysis of urban literature. John C. Ball (2004) and John McLeod (2004), for instance, have employed the concepts and methodologies of postcolonial studies to examine the literary representation of the city of London; their studies are evidence that an awareness of postcolonial processes, contexts and ideas is not only useful but also essential in order to understand the global city of the twenty-first century. In this paper

⁴ For a discussion of these notions and their relevance within the field of urban studies, see Bounds (2004: 6-16).

I am going to use postcolonial concepts like Avtar Brah's *diasporic identity*, but also ideas from postmodern urban theory, such as Michel de Certeau's *spatial stories*, and from feminist and queer urban studies, such as the gendered division of urban space and the spatialisation of sexuality.

2. Lee Maracle's *Bridge Indians*

The first story I am going to look at, Lee Maracle's 'Polka Partners, Uptown Indians and White Folks', revolves around a group of young First Nations men and women residing in the Downtown Eastside, the poorest area in Vancouver. Their lives change when a stranger appears in the neighbourhood with plans to create a community centre for Native people. The main character and first-person narrator, a young woman called Stacey, is sceptical at first, but she eventually decides to get involved. Her work at the centre helps her find her own place in the city and within her community; unfortunately, when the centre is denied funding, the organisation behind the project decides to move it uptown, which alienates its downtown customers. This move not only confirms Stacey's apprehensions about the impossibility of establishing a solid First Nations community in the heart of the city, but it also raises more general questions about community-making in underprivileged urban areas and Aboriginal issues in contemporary Canada.

Stacey and her friends exemplify many of the problems and challenges young First Nations people encounter when they abandon the reserve and move into the city. Repeatedly throughout the story, Stacey mentions her little reserve, up north in the mountains, which she still considers her home and remembers with nostalgia. She feels alienated by an urban landscape which precludes any kind of meaningful relationship with nature and its cycles, forcing her to sever all ties with her previous way of life:

The colour of earth death, the scent of harvest amidst the riot of fire colours, like a glorious party just before it's all over – earth's last supper is hard to deal with in the middle of the tired old grey buildings of the downtown periphery. I can see the mountains of my home through the cracks between the buildings that aren't butted one up against the other. It seems a little hokey to take a bus across the bridge and haul ass through nature's bounty, so I don't do it any more. (Maracle 2005: 180)

Feelings of displacement and uprootedness are frequent among urban Aboriginal youth, who often find it difficult to cope with life in the city, for several reasons. Because of the now-infamous residential school system, created in the nineteenth century and continued until the 1970s, most native people have had a very poor educational experience, which leads to low employment rates, and low salaries if they are employed at all (Brown *et al.* 2005; Loyie 1997: 292). Mental health is also an issue, as many residential school survivors still suffer the emotional consequences of the abuse they experienced as children. Often, a cycle of abuse ensues in which survivors subject their own families to the same physical and emotional maltreatment they had to endure (Kuran 2000). Thus the legacy of the residential school system is passed on to the younger generations: young Native Canadian people who grow up in poverty, either in abusive or dysfunctional families or within the foster care system, tend to drop out of

school early to support their families or themselves, and may end up resorting to crime, alcohol and drug abuse when faced with unemployment, lack of housing and social isolation (Brown *et al.* 2005).

Most of these issues feature in Maracle's story as constitutive of the everyday reality of its protagonists. Stacey and her friends are school dropouts, wear second-hand clothes and cannot afford to pay the electricity bills: "I wished I had gone to school past seventh grade" (2005: 190); "In seventh grade Tony walked out of the doors of that school and never went back" (2005: 198); "What's he doing at the tailor's? Don't believe I ever saw one of us going in there before" (2005: 180); "First time I ever bought something no one ever bought before" (2005: 180); "Whoever she was, she did not live here . . . and she never had to wrap up in a blanket in the dark without any hydro" (2005: 200). Stacey seems to have had trouble with the police in the past: "I knew enough about who the mayor was to stay in my corner. He was head of police and that was enough for me to have nothing to say" (2005: 189). She also drinks heavily and is pessimistic about the possibility of creating a better future for her community: "I scribbled little notes to myself. . . . Scribbling didn't help and I took to the wine bottle" (2005: 185); "Life here is raw, wine is drunk not because it is genteel, but because it blurs, dulls the need for dreams, knocks your *sense of future* back into the neighbourhoods of *the people it's meant for – white folks*" (2005: 185, emphasis mine).

The fact that the story is set in the Downtown Eastside is also very significant: the DTES, as it is popularly known, is not only the poorest neighbourhood in Vancouver, but also the poorest postal code in Canada. The City of Vancouver defines it as "a traditionally low income neighbourhood . . . [which] has experienced an influx of problems such as drug addiction and dealing, HIV infection, prostitution, crime, lack of adequate housing, high unemployment, and the loss of many legitimate businesses" ('Downtown Eastside Revitalization'). Even though there are twenty-two Native reserves in the Greater Vancouver Regional District, the majority of the First Nations population live off-reserve, and, although it has been argued that there is no distinctively Indian neighbourhood in Vancouver (Starkins 1987: 5), most Native people are driven to the DTES as the only area where they can find affordable housing. Many of them come from other parts of British Columbia, and even from other provinces. In this neighbourhood, Aboriginals make up thirty percent of the residents, a figure ten times higher than the national average ('Pivot Legal Society').

Living in poverty in a deprived part of the city, Stacey is acutely aware of 'race' and social class differences, not only between First Nations and white people, but also, and especially, among First Nations people. She makes a sharp distinction between uptown, rich Indians and downtown, poor ones. One of the main reasons she doesn't trust the stranger is that he does not look like them, but rather "like your regular tourist" (2005: 181-82) or, as she puts it, "like a polka partner from the other side of the tracks that form my colour bar" (2005: 183). In the DTES, his appearance, language and demeanour make him stand out as "an uptown Native, slumming" (2005: 181). Through the uptown/downtown dichotomy, 'race' and social class acquire a spatial dimension which determines the way in which Stacey and her friends perceive the city, and the way in which they live in it:

It never ceased to amaze me how we could turn the largest cities into small towns. Wherever we went we seemed to take the country with us. Downtown – the skids for white folks – was for us just another village, *not really part of Vancouver*. . . . Drunk or sober, we amble along the three square blocks that make up the area as though it were a *village stuck in the middle of nowhere*. (2005: 179, emphasis mine)

This passage, significantly placed at the very beginning of the story, suggests that Stacey and her friends inhabit their own particular city, or rather their own particular understanding of the city. For them, the DTES is not even part of the urban: it is perceived as a village or a “sorry little half-village” (2005: 186), contained by physical and imaginary boundaries which they dare not cross.

The idea of *spatial stories*, as defined by Michel de Certeau, is very useful here. De Certeau coined this term to refer to the way in which the individual maps the city, makes sense of it and defines it through everyday practice, especially through the act of walking (1984: 91-110; Tonkiss 2005: 126-30). By walking around the city, its dwellers appropriate the urban space, and at the same time they find – or make – space for themselves within it. The spatial story told by Stacey and her friends, however, is one of exclusion and marginalisation: if walking around the city is a way of appropriating it, we could say that they have managed to appropriate only a very limited portion of the urban space. They never venture beyond the limits of what they consider their village, their “urban reserve” (2005: 180), so the rest of the city remains unknown as an uncharted territory. They are not aware that their neighbourhood is only a small part of a wider urban environment, they are “not quite cognizant of the largesse of the city” (2005: 185), and they do not understand or take part in the workings of city life at large. Their disconnectedness and social isolation is made clear in the story when the mayor of Vancouver visits the community centre and none of its customers or volunteer workers seem to be aware of who he is, what he does, or what interest he has in visiting them.

The instability of their position – between the village life of the reserve and city life in the DTES but taking no real part in either of them – is encapsulated in the expression *Bridge Indians*, which gives the title to this essay. Stacey uses this term to refer to herself and her people: they are “Bridge Indians. Not village, not urban” (2005: 185); “sentinels – not people but sentinels, alone on a bridge, guarding nothing” (2005: 187). This metaphorical bridge is, just as real ones are, an ambivalent space: it stands between two opposites, simultaneously uniting them and separating them. It is a pathway but also a boundary, and, as such, it becomes an excellent example of what Homi K. Bhabha has defined as *liminal space*: an interstitial, in-between space which Bhabha associates with the emergence of cultural hybridity (1994: 4). Other postcolonial authors and critics have picked up the metaphor of the bridge as a signifier of liminality and in-betweenness: Fred Wah, for example, has defined the hyphen as “that marked (or unmarked) space that *both binds and divides*. . . It is a property marker, a boundary post, a borderland, . . . *a bridge, a no-man’s land*...” (1996: 60, emphasis mine). Vancouver-born Japanese-Canadian author Joy Kogawa has also used the image of the bridge in her own writing: in her acclaimed novel *Obasan* (1981), coincidentally set partly in Vancouver, one of the main characters works for an organization called *Bridge*,

and “experiences ‘bridge’ as a verb: a bridge is what takes you from one side to otherness” (1990: 93).

The notion of the bridge, with all its associated meanings and theoretical implications, becomes a central image in Maracle’s story. The community centre, for example, is intended as a bridge between the Native people and city life, a small portion of urban public space which they can claim as their own: in Stacey’s words, it is “one dingy little storefront . . . but it was ours and we had never had a storefront that we could enter, have coffee and get treated like real customers” (2005: 188). Its main purpose is to create a stronger sense of community among the urban First Nations people, a collective identity based on belonging and not on displacement, rooted in the city they inhabit and not only in the nostalgia for the village they left behind. The Métis secretary hired by Polka Boy to help run the office also acts as a bridge between the centre and the rest of the city, as she is the one who instructs them about “office life in the other world” (2005: 188), organizes the mayor’s visit to the centre and teaches them how to behave properly around him. For Stacey, the secretary abridges the distance between downtown and uptown, between herself and the white people, broadening her outlook and giving her a deeper understanding of everyday life in the city: “I got to be friends with the secretary, who took me uptown every now and then, showed me other places she had worked. Great anonymous buildings, filled with women... As the mystery of office work fell away from these women, the common bond of survival was replacing my former hostility. The sea of white faces began to take on names with characters” (2005: 189-90). Stacey herself inadvertently becomes a bridge between her people and the community centre, when Polka Boy discovers that she is some kind of leader among the downtown Natives and skilfully tries to get her involved as a first step towards reaching the others, something she resents later on: “I was the key to getting everyone else’s co-operation” (2005: 191), “get the lead street girl on your side and the rest will follow” (2005: 200). Once again the bridge appears as an ambiguous, contradictory space, as Stacey is placed in an unpleasant in-between position, torn between the café and the community centre, between clinging to the comfortable apathy of her past life and believing in the possibility of a better future. Her work in the office contributes to creating a stronger urban First Nations community but, paradoxically, it also isolates her from the close-knit circle of friends who formed her own small community before the arrival of Polka Boy.

Stacey’s initial reaction to the idea of the community centre is one of defeatism: “My imagination ran on about the reality of it, arguing with the impossibility of it surviving. I saw the street, its frail dark citizenry rushing pell-mell toward this dream and imploding at the end of the dream’s arrest. For arrest it would. No one would allow the total transformation of this end of town into a real community” (2005: 186-87). The more involved she gets in the project, however, the more positive she feels about the possibility of creating a space for the downtown Natives to call their own, and a real urban First Nations community structured around it. Her work in the office also helps her find her own place in the city and her own sense of belonging, to the point where she stops longing for her reserve. The seasonal changes in nature, which she used to be keenly aware of, now go by largely unnoticed: “I got so caught up in the wonder of it all that autumn came and went without me thinking about the beauty of the colours of

impending earth death or yearning for my mountains” (2005: 193). This explains her frustration when the head office decides to move the centre uptown: “I don’t give a shit about a horde of uptown Indians with too much money and not enough sense not to kill each other... Hope. Expectations. Great expectations I had never had. An office. A simple gawdamned office where we could breathe community into our souls was all we hoped for, and it had been too much” (2005: 195). In the end, despite efforts to the contrary, her initial instincts are confirmed: the opposition between uptown and downtown prevails, and the urban socioscape remains divided by the invisible lines of privilege and marginalisation.

3. Shani Mootoo’s *cultural bastards*

In Shani Mootoo’s ‘Out on Main Street’, a lesbian couple of Indo-Trinidadian origin go to a restaurant in Main Street – the area known as Little India or Punjabi Market – in search of the food that reminds them of their home. Once there, however, they are made to feel like outsiders because of their appearance and the Trinidadian English they speak. In a neighbourhood inhabited by what the narrator calls “real flesh and blood Indian from India” (2005: 208), they are perceived and made to perceive themselves as “watered-down Indians . . . [not] good grade A Indians”, “kitchen Indians” or “Indian-in-skin-colour-only” (2005: 205, 206, 212). Their connection with India has been severed by a succession of diasporic movements and processes which began several generations ago, when their ancestors left the country and migrated to Trinidad. The narrator, whose name we don’t know, remains Hindu, but her family does not observe religious rituals and customs anymore; her girlfriend’s family, on the other hand, has been Presbyterian for several generations due to the influence of Canadian missionaries, which explains her Anglo-Saxon name, Janet. Both of them moved to Vancouver as young women, but they still consider Trinidad their home. In this sense, we could say that they are good examples of what Avtar Brah defines as *diasporic identities*: for Brah, “diasporic identities are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing ‘imagined’ and ‘encountered’ communities” (1996: 192). Mootoo’s story, however, explores the problematics of accepting and embracing one’s identity as diasporic when faced with rejection from those *encountered* communities one would like to identify with. A climactic moment occurs when the narrator is treated with scorn by the waiters of the restaurant because she doesn’t know the Indian names of the traditional Indian sweets: it suddenly dawns on her that her mixed heritage makes her a “bastardized Indian”, and that “all a we in Trinidad is cultural bastards” (2005: 213). Against Brah’s assertion that diasporic identity is by definition plural, changing and multi-locational (1996: 194), the narrator renounces multiplicity and multi-locationality and wishes she could adopt a fixed, non-hyphenated, monolithic identity: “I looking forward to de day I find out dat place inside me where I am *nothing else but Trinidadian*, whatever dat could turn out to be” (2005: 213, emphasis mine).

Ethnic identity, both individual and collective, is determinant in the way Mootoo’s characters inhabit the city: when the narrator admits that, because they are not *real Indians*, they cannot go to Main Street as often as they would like to, it becomes clear

that their movements within the urban space are constrained by the coordinates of belonging and not belonging. It is a paradox intrinsic to the urban context that public space, which should by definition be open and available to all, is in reality governed by complex power relations, and by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion derived from social processes of identity formation. As Susan Ruddick has explained, public space is now understood “not simply as a passive arena for the manifestation of specific predetermined social behaviours. . . . [but as] an *active medium* through which new identities are *created or contested*” (1996: 135, emphasis in the original). In Vancouver, the construction of Little India around the intersection of 49th Avenue and Main Street is closely intertwined with the construction of a strong Indo-Canadian identity rooted in this area. In contrast, Mootoo’s Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian protagonists are perceived as the embodiment of a *diluted* Indianness, and their presence and visibility in the public space of Little India becomes a potential challenge to the very definition of Indo-Canadian identity. The strategies by which they are excluded from this space are subtle but effective, ranging from disdainful looks and condescending attitudes to the waiters’ reluctance to serve them in English: “dey insist on giving de answer in Hindi or Punjabi or Urdu or Gujarati. How I suppose to know de difference even! And den dey look at yuh disdainful disdainful – like yuh disloyal, like yuh is a traitor” (2005: 208).

Ethnicity, however, is not the only issue here: as lesbians, their gender and sexuality intersect with their ethnic origin, adding to their marginalisation from an urban space which has been constructed as predominantly heteronormative. The narrator and her girlfriend form what is usually labelled as a butch-femme couple: Janet is described as very *feminine* – that is, she conforms to traditional conceptions of femininity, in that she wears “jeans and T-shirt and high-heel shoe and makeup and have long hair loose and flying about like she is a walking-talking shampoo ad” (2005: 208); the narrator, on the other hand, assumes and displays traits and attitudes traditionally associated with *masculinity*: she sports a crew cut, wears her blue jeans tucked inside her jim-boots, walks “like a strong-man monkey” (2005: 209) and is overprotective of *her woman* when men look at her. Of course, this is an oversimplified definition of a butch-femme relationship, especially since it has been argued that butch-femme roles have changed dramatically in recent years, evolving away from traditional male/female gender roles (Inness 2006); but I won’t go into this here. What concerns me is the way in which queer sexuality becomes yet another pretext for urban exclusion, and also the way in which their modes of self-presentation as butch and femme mediate different urban experiences for each of them. In the restaurant, Janet becomes an object of male attention and desire: she is observed, approached, and even harassed by the waiters. The narrator, on the other hand, looks, in her own words, “like a gender dey forget to classify” (2005: 209), and feels compelled, at some points, to perform the gender role that is expected from her as a woman. This performance involves practising “a jiggly-wiggly kind a walk” (2005: 209) in front of the mirror, tucking in her elbows close to her sides so as not to look like a strong man, and putting on her “femest smile” when she tries to avoid confrontation with the waiter, but also returning to her “most unfemest manner” (2005: 217) when he speaks to Janet inappropriately. Paula Morgan has interpreted this part of the story as “a shot . . . at the manner in which gender orientation disciplines the body into postures that perform hyper-masculinity – the

strong-man ‘monkey’ stance suggestive of excessive muscle and body mass, and hyper-femininity – ‘jiggle wiggley’ movements suggestive of excessive curvaceousness” (2007: 101). While this is a very interesting observation, it nevertheless fails to acknowledge the significance of Mootoo’s choice of setting. Morgan’s point can be argued further by incorporating a consideration of the specificities of urban space, namely the manner in which the public space of the city exacerbates gender polarization and disciplines the body in ways that are specifically urban.

Feminist geographers and social theorists have long been aware of the fact that “the meaning of urban space is composed around gendered bodies, . . . [and] social space is tailored to conventional gender roles and sexual codes” (Tonkiss 2005: 94-95, emphasis in the original). Liz Bondi, in her attempt to identify the processes through which meanings of gender are inscribed into urban spaces and activated in the everyday lives of urban dwellers, argues that “gender is produced performatively, that is through the routine, unselfconscious citation or enactment of gender scripts in the ordinary practices of urban life. These processes are as much about the embedding of gender in urban space as in the bodies of city dwellers. Thus, gender and urban space are performed in relation to each other and are mutually constituted” (2005). The public space of the city has been codified as typically masculine and heteronormative, whereas the private sphere has been defined as typically feminine, and perceived as the realm where expressions of *alternative* (i.e. non-straight) sexuality belong. This opposition is deeply entrenched in the urban imaginary, and it is perpetuated through daily reenactments of what it means and what it entails to be male, female, straight or gay in the contemporary city. Moreover, gender and sexuality are strictly understood as sets of binary oppositions, and in-between positions along the gender and sexuality spectrums are not contemplated: “cities are sites in which women and men routinely enact a variety of masculinities and femininities, [but] this diversity generally remains firmly bound within the dominant binary structure, which reduces differences to variations on a theme” (Bondi 2005). In Mootoo’s story, the narrator is pressured into complying with gender stereotypes but vacillates between performances of masculinity and femininity, the only scripts readily available within the urban space. Janet, on the other hand, personifies *acceptable* feminine qualities, but has to deal with preconceived notions about the subordinate role of women in the public space of the city, and with the attitudes and behaviours that typically arise from these preconceptions.

If gender and urban space are understood as performative and mutually constitutive, it necessarily follows that the production of gendered urban space can be subverted through alternative gender performances – enactments of gender that do not fit neatly into the masculine/feminine duality. David Bell *et al.*, for example, have argued that performances of hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity are potentially subversive because they constitute exaggerated and parodic versions of prescriptive male and female roles (1994: 33, in Bondi 2005). From this point of view, it is tempting to see Mootoo’s protagonists as gender dissidents, and to interpret their self-presentation as butch and femme as a transgression, their presence in the public space of the restaurant as a challenge to conventional notions about gender and urban space. However, Bondi remains unconvinced about the viability of this perspective:

In so far as such performances are recognised as parodies of dominant gender scripts, they have the potential to unsettle [them]... However, this account is limited by its reliance on the active choices of performers and the recognition of parodic intent by observers... Indeed hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine styles are at least as likely to reinforce as to disrupt normative discourses of gender, and those who adopt them are as likely to be pressed into, and to find themselves colluding with, entirely conventional readings of gender and sexuality, whatever their intentions might be. (2005)

In 'Out on Main Street', the narrator shifts back and forth between deliberate performances of hyperbolic femininity and masculinity, but she does so in response to social pressure to conform to conventional gender roles: overall, her attitude is far from subversive and would be better described as compliant. Moreover, as Bondi predicts above, she contributes to reinforcing normative notions of gender by choosing to display some of the most stereotypically gender-specific attitudes, such as masculine possessiveness and feminine flirtatiousness.

Mootoo's protagonists are evidently not interested in *queering* urban space: aware that they have entered an utterly non-gay-friendly part of the city, they concentrate their efforts in *passing* as straight – yet another example of performance. They manage to do so with varying degrees of success until a couple of their openly lesbian friends enter the restaurant: "With Sandy and Lise it is a dead giveaway dat . . . dey have a blatant penchant fuh women. . . . Well, all cover get blown. If it was even remotely possible dat I wasn't noticeable before, now Janet and I were over-exposed. We could a easily suffer from hypothermia, specially since it suddenly get cold cold in dere" (2005: 218). Their presence in the restaurant was already conspicuous because of their gender and ethnicity, but the arrival of Sandy and Lise makes them hyper-visible with respect to their sexuality. The initially subtle attempts to exclude them from this portion of urban space evolve into an atmosphere of increasing tension and hostility towards them, until they give in to the pressure and leave. As queer Indo-Trinidadian women, the rejection they experience when they go to Little India draws an imaginary boundary around this neighbourhood, mapping it as an area into which they are not allowed to move freely: they are effectively banished from Little India in much the same way as Maracle's characters were confined to the Downtown Eastside.

4. Conclusion

In these stories, First Nations people and Indo-Trinidadians are similarly excluded from engaging in the life of the city in meaningful ways. The simple, everyday act of walking around the city – which, as I have already discussed, can be considered a powerful means of appropriating urban space – involves a continuous negotiation of invisible pathways and boundaries erected along the lines of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and social class. In Maracle's story, Stacey and her friends stay within the limits of the DTES, keeping to the area they consider their *reserve*, otherwise mapped in the dominant urban imaginary as "the skids" (2005: 179). Stacey will only enter the uptown area when accompanied by the Métis secretary, who becomes her passport into the "other world" of white people (2005: 188), a safe-conduct into a territory where she

does not belong. In 'Out on Main Street', a convincing performance of conventional gender and sexual identities is required before the protagonists are allowed into a space constructed as deeply heteronormative. Both stories raise interesting questions about how public the public space of the city really is, drawing attention to the fact that, for some urban dwellers, interactions within the public realm are fraught with stress, anxiety and the possibility of conflict. In both cases, the crossing of an imaginary frontier takes an emotional toll on the characters, as Stacey's involvement with the community centre makes her drift apart from her close friends, and Janet and her girlfriend end up turning against each other and having a fight. The spaces they are trying to gain access to – an office, a restaurant, the streets – are all within the public sphere, but they are encoded with notions of belonging and entitlement, and with very strict guidelines as to who is welcome and who is not. Ultimately, the couple is forced to leave the restaurant and the community centre is uprooted from the DTES: their attempts at claiming urban space are thwarted, and their experience of the urban is framed by different degrees of alienation and marginalisation.

By their mere existence, Maracle's *Bridge Indians* and Mootoo's *cultural bastards* undermine most of the dominant discourses surrounding the city they inhabit: not only the idea of optimum liveability, but also the construction of Vancouver as proudly multicultural and gay-friendly. Like liveability, multiculturalism and gay-friendliness are deeply ingrained in dominant representations of Vancouver: Vancouver's *Official Visitors' Guide*, for example, states that "From the start, Vancouver has been a place of multiculturalism . . . and the spirit of inclusion extends to all corners of life. You'll see Vancouver's profound diversity when you explore local neighbourhoods. Young and old, able-bodied and mobility impaired, single and married, gay and straight – Vancouver is welcoming to all. This is one city where you'll never feel less than accepted for who you are" (2007: 9). Here, the contrast between competing representations of the city is almost ironic: while the travel guide describes Vancouver enthusiastically as a welcoming city which celebrates diversity, Maracle and Mootoo's short stories paint a picture of racism, homophobia and urban exclusion. Reports on the liveability of world cities like those elaborated by *The Economist*, Mercer and *Monocle* also have their limitations: they are usually designed with a very specific audience in mind, and intended for circulation within the world of business among a globally mobile economic and cultural elite. The liveability markers they employ, although diverse – ranging from environmental consciousness to threat from terrorism – are not sensitive to most of the issues encountered by the inhabitants of the multicultural city in their everyday lives. The stigmatization of a specific neighbourhood, the overt and subtle ways in which gay people are discriminated against and the social isolation of an ethnic minority cannot be quantified as a percentage, nor are they relevant to the target readership of magazines like *The Economist* and *Monocle*. However, as integral to the urban experience of many citizens, they cannot be overlooked or readily dismissed.

Literary accounts like those of Maracle and Mootoo offer a glimpse into a rather unliveable side of Vancouver that is systematically excluded from dominant narratives of the city, and unsettle these narratives by revealing the contradictions and discontinuities between the lived reality of the city and the discourse of habitability, plurality and inclusion. Against the widely spread narratives which originate in the

worlds of tourism and city marketing, literary accounts of the city stand as alternative micronarratives of the urban experience, and they become invaluable tools for retrieving the stories, the lives and the voices of those who inhabit the margins of the urban sociospace.

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Alicia Menéndez Tarrazo is Junior Lecturer in Postcolonial Literatures in English at the University of Oviedo. Her doctoral research deals with the literary representation of the city of Vancouver as a multicultural, diasporic and gendered space.

Address: Seminario de Inglés Urbano Viñuela, Departamento de Filología Anglogermánica y Francesa, Universidad de Oviedo, Campus del Milán, Teniente Alfonso Martínez, s/n, Oviedo 33011, Asturias, Spain. Tlf: +34 985104530. Fax: +34 985104555